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UCSB CHILD ABUSE STUDIES LEAD TO SUCCESSFUL PREVENTION

Children have a devoted protector in UC Santa Barbara psychology professor Daphne Bugental.

Bugental has spent much of the past two decades studying child abuse --researching its causes, identifying family situations apt to lead to child abuse, and building profiles of the types of parents and children who are most at risk.

And in the last few years has come the payoff.

Working with family service agencies in Santa Barbara, California, Bugental has come up with a child-abuse prevention plan that, in its trial run, lowered significantly the incidence of abuse in families in at-risk situations.

"We looked to see what would happen if we identified children being born to families at risk to become abusive and then provided home visitations during the first year of that child's life," Bugental says.

"And we compared it to families also at risk but not receiving home visitation."

Bugental found that the home visits -- made by trained counselors -- lowered the incidence of abuse significantly.

"The level of abuse during the first year of life among counseled families was down to 4 percent," she says. "The control group had 24 percent abuse. Twenty-four percent is big, it's huge."

The project, conducted in conjunction with Santa Barbara County Public Health Department and a private agency called Child Abuse Listening and Mediating (CALM), began in 1994.

Bugental identified 96 expectant at-risk families and asked them to be part of the study.

During her many years of research, Bugental has identified characteristics that make certain parents more likely to be abusers, certain children more likely to be abused, and certain family situations as likely to foster or exacerbate an abuse problem.

In her intervention research, she has focused on abuse-prone children and abuse inducing situations rather than the parents.

"There's nothing wrong with these parents," Bugental says. "They're just regular parents facing difficult life events."

Situations that increase the risk of abuse are basically situations that increase parental stress, Bugental said.

Multiple births -- twins, triplets and the like -- increase stress and Bugental has found that such children are more likely to be abused.

So are premature babies, babies with hearing disabilities, disfigurements or impaired mobility.

Premature babies are at risk because they are not yet developed enough to accept social contact and tend to withdraw from their parents' touch.

"When they do that, a parent -- particularly a new parent -- is going to feel that this child doesn't like me; this child is rejecting me," Bugental says.

A child whose hearing impairment is undetected might be perceived as ignoring his parents.

"A parent might think, 'This child is being disobedient,' and smack the child," Bugental said.

Perhaps at greatest risk are children with physical anomalies.

"Anything that makes the child look odd in some unexpected way to the parents puts a child at risk," Bugental says.

"Historically, these are the children who are at risk to be abandoned or to be victims of infanticide."

Bugental emphasizes that the parents she sees are everyday people and not any more prone to be abusive than anyone else in the same circumstances.

"But if you have a child who is more demanding than you ever thought or is not your idea of a perfect child, you are going to have some things to work out," she says.

"We want to help in that process."

To do that, Bugental is again joining forces with Santa Barbara County Public Health Department and CALM to put together a second home visitation alliance called the Family Thriving Program.

The program is financed with \$2.5 million in grants from the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation.

Again, families facing situations that can give rise to abuse will be identified and will receive the benefit of 15-20 visits from trained counselors during their child's first year of life.

The research team will continue to monitor the families through the child's third year.

Counselors are there to support the parents by connecting them with other parents who have children with similar problems, helping them find government and special interest agencies -- such as Sojourn and Easter Seals -- that can help.

"We're not solving problems for them, we're helping them to become their own problem-solvers," Bugental says.

Children are monitored by frequent testing of the levels of stress-indicative hormones in their saliva.

Bugental hopes this second program will again show reduced levels of child abuse in the group receiving counselor visits.

"We want to be able to show, as we have in the past, that in the first year of life, maltreatment, abuse and neglect are best prevented when people are receiving home visitation services of this type," she says.

According to Bugental, the cost of prevention is lower than the cost of abuse treatment.

For every dollar invested in prevention, she notes, there is a cost savings of four dollars to public agencies later on.

"People are finding that prevention is the single best way to go," Bugental says.

"Everyone is hoping that you can provide help to abused children, too, but that's nowhere near as effective as preventing the problem in the first place."

About UC Santa Barbara

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